

A dialogue on peace in a violent world

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ABOUT US

The New Leam is a monthly magazine on education and culture which started in 2014. It seeks to create new possibilities in the practice of pedagogy, culture and aesthetics through the publication of innovative reading material.

This booklet-written in a dialogic form-has emerged out of the urge to initiate a meaningful conversation with young learners, researchers and educationists.

The New Leam

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Preface

The New Leam is a platform that has successfully built a bridge between theory and practice, academics and experience and most importantly between the rational mind and the creative heart. It is paradoxical that the contemporary education system emphasises upon the fact that these are binary opposites and cannot ever be united. However, through our extensive work and rooted research we have discovered that academic rigour and aesthetic sensibilities can be cultivated simultaneously, and a meaningful education must not see the individual in terms of fragments but as a complete entity. It is with this mission and zeal in mind that over the last two years *The New Leam* has raised many important debates, offered valuable insights and promised to lead an innovative movement for an alternative engagement not only with education but also with culture, politics, ethics and society. In this process, we have felt that there is a need for quality reading material that can be easily appreciated by a large audience on themes that concern us all. Moreover, we have realised that as long as possible we have to produce texts that are not jargonised and do not require specialized knowledge, but rather have an appeal to people across various sections of the

population. It is with this idea that we have come up with *The New I Learn Booklet Series*.

The booklet in your hand has emerged out of this realization. It is written in a way that it can communicate equally well with a young adult, an educator and an activist. We believe that the theme of the booklet is of utmost significance in our times where we see violence all around us, be it in international politics, within the national boundary or even in our own interpersonal relationships. As a forum that works in the field of education, we could not remain indifferent to such an important aspect of our lives. After all, it is education itself that plays such an important role in the cultivation of our society, in defining the relationship that people share with themselves and with each other as a collective. Peace is not certainly just the absence of war; it is about an existential harmony with oneself and others and thus it is an important pedagogic/educational challenge too.

The present booklet is written in a dialogic manner and it has been purposefully designed in such a way that it can be read within an hour or two and yet leave a lasting impact upon the reader. It is precisely because of this that it can be cherished by readers of all generations and from all walks of life. This booklet will throw light on the importance of peace in our times and how we as ordinary human beings in the world have a shared responsibility towards building it for ourselves and the generations that are yet to come. It

cannot be denied that if education is understood in its holistic essence, it signifies the development of the individual and all his creative and higher sensibilities. Peace education is indeed an important aspect of our lives today, because of fragmentation, over ambition, competition and a restless global economy that values competitiveness more than cooperation, winning more than sharing. This booklet has tried to deal with the theme of peace in a manner than is close to our every day existence and answers many dilemmas that we may share about it. We are sure that it would be able to communicate with the readers and enable them to look beyond every day violence and hatred in the world and evolve an understanding of peace that is intrinsic to the very nature of true education. We wish to assert yet again that the dialogic format of the booklet is innovative, communicative and most importantly a pedagogic art as it breaks the monologue of a lecture or the passivity of reading an essay; rather it seeks to establish a bond between the reader and the text.

The booklet would not have been possible without our collective efforts. After all, it is the extensive work that we have been doing with students, researchers and teachers that has inspired us to publish such materials. We would also like to thank our readers from all corners of the world and our well-wishers who have appreciated and encouraged us along the way. Last but not the least, we would like to extend our thanks to Prof. Avijit Pathak (Centre for The

Study of Social Systems, JNU) who very kindly agreed to write this booklet and thereby share his insightful thoughts with our readers. We extend our deep felt gratitude to him for his efforts and encouragement for *The New Learner*. We hope that the booklet will be liked and cherished by our readers and they would share it with their friends and colleagues, and the message would reach out far and wide.

Vikash Sharma
Editor
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Student: *Sir, I don't understand why you keep talking about peace when even a small child knows that the world around us is violent—extremely violent. Is it ever possible to strive for peace? You are a teacher, an educationist. Tell me, Sir.*

Teacher: Yes, like you I too see, feel and experience the world. Things around us are violent. Not just mega wars and terrorist violence; we see violence in almost every sphere of life—violence in the application of science and technology, violence in the practice of politics, violence in human relations, even in supposedly 'intimate' relations, violence in cultural productions, violence in the language we speak, and violence even in the politics of resistance. Violence is direct/physical as well as symbolic/psychological/cultural. For instance, war is a direct manifestation of physical/brute violence. But when one sees the world through stereotypes, and evolves a negative orientation towards others in the name of culture, ethnicity and race, it is also a form of violence, even if it exists only at the psychological level. Likewise, indifference to others or refusal to acknowledge their presence is a form of violence. Violence is the absence of connectedness and symmetrical relationships. Violence is a broken communication. And I know that amidst this all-pervading violence, the idea of peace may look absurd. Definitely, it is difficult to pursue. However, as a teacher I feel that what prevails need not necessarily be desirable, and what appears

to be distant may be worth striving for.

Student: *I don't understand what you mean when you say that what exists need not be desirable, and what is distant is worth striving for. It goes against our common sense. Are you denying the reality?*

Teacher: What is the reality? Try to understand it. What exists right now is only a fragment of the reality. And what remains hidden is also real—a possibility which, given a chance, can unfold itself. In the seed of a rose lies the beautiful flower rose that needs sunshine, water and nurturing to manifest itself. Likewise, in a violent world you may not see peace; but peace remains a possibility—a hidden possibility that needs adequate cultivation and education to manifest itself.

Student: *Do you mean to suggest that it is possible for humans to become peaceful? Aren't you expecting too much? Isn't it a fact that by nature we are egoistic, selfish and, therefore, violent?*

Teacher: Don't you think you are absolutizing human nature? Yes, throughout human civilization you have seen violence, hatred, exploitation; and hence it is tempting to conclude that by nature we are violent. And there are thinkers and philosophers who might argue that, despite the civilizing process, the animal instincts remain within us; we are driven by instincts that demand immediate gratification; we are selfish and aggressive. It is also argued that the maximization of his own pleasure is man's ultimate goal; by nature man is not considerate, altruistic and cooperative; and hence what we call society is merely a

contract, a survival strategy; the volcano lies inside; anytime it can explode, and society or civilization can disintegrate. However, such a view fails to take into account that human nature is elastic; it evolves and alters. Violence is not the last word. It is possible for humans to become peaceful. But then, it is true that there is recurrence of violence and war, selfishness and brutality; we see more wars, less Buddhas. For most of us, our potential Buddha nature has not been allowed to unfold itself because of certain social, historical, cultural and psychic forces. That is why, we tend to think that we are inherently violent.

Student: *Sir, can you explain it further? What are the reasons—social, political or historical—that stimulate violence rather than peace?*

Teacher: There are many. Let me take three instances from our contemporary living. It would be easier for you to understand. First, try to understand the dialectic of what you and I regard as the doctrine of 'progress'. Have you ever noticed that despite all the material comforts it provides, its principle is inherently violent? Its 'objective' science causes a separation between the knower and the known; this distance causes a terribly utilitarian orientation towards nature; it manipulates and conquers nature; technology becomes domination, even though it intensifies production, stimulates the economy and raises the 'standard of living'. In fact, this violence does not remain limited to only man-nature relationship. Man causes violence to himself. We lose our mystery; we become measurable,

quantifiable resources. If the economy finds us useless we can be displaced, sacrificed and thrown into the dustbins of history. Yes, progress has a huge price to pay—environmental disaster, displaced people without a sense of belonging and culture, alienated man caught into the chains of a heartless bureaucracy, and neurotic restlessness for achieving unlimited growth. Second, see the modern nation-state and its cult of nationalism. Even though it plays a role for some sort of collective welfare, it is inseparable from violence. The wars we have fought in the name of nationalism, the sacrifices we have demanded from people for the glory of the nation, the mass psychology of hatred we have generated towards ‘enemy’ nations, the dissenters we have humiliated, tortured and killed in the name of national safety, and the way the state legitimates its coercive apparatus—everything suggests the celebration of violence. In fact, modern nation-states, despite the political vocabulary of democracy or socialism, further intensify the militarization of consciousness and popularize a discourse of hatred. Third, look at the logic of market and consumption. It manufactures needs, intensifies desire, stimulates the urge to possess and accumulate. It makes one self-obsessed and narcissistic. With envy and jealousy it destroys human relationships. In other words, you breathe violence, smell violence, live in violence. The politico-economic/socio-cultural environment around you provokes violence.

Student: *Even though your arguments are convincing, I feel you are unduly critical of modern living, and, it seems, you are silent about*

other ‘non-modern’ forms of violence. What do you think?

Teacher: Not really. True, I have given you the examples from our modern living. But this does not mean that I am pleading for something beautiful in a non-modern world. In fact, throughout human history we have seen violence. Otherwise, there was no need for Jesus to tell us: ‘Love thy neighbor’. There was no need for Buddha or Mahavira to speak of peace. See casteism, racism, patriarchy—you see the worst forms of violence: violence in the name of ‘purity’ vs. ‘pollution’, hierarchy and exclusion; violence in the name of racial/ethnic superiority; or violence in the name of brute masculine authority and

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subjugation of the feminine.

Student: *Well, now I understand what you are saying. I understand how violence has been promoted through diverse systems—from slavery to feudalism, from casteism to colonialism, from market-oriented capitalism to militant nationalism. But tell me what happens to our consciousness when we perpetuate violence.*

Teacher: Possibly there is no easy answer to the question. However, I want you to reflect on the following and find your answer. Suppose I feel that my self-worth lies in my possession—my ability to accumulate wealth, fame and power, my capacity to ‘distinguish’ and separate myself from others, and my pride. This would cause tremendous fear and insecurity in my consciousness. I would fear others—they might become more wealthy, more powerful and more famous than me; I might lose what I possess—my wealth and name. In other words, I would never be able to relate to people; I would never trust anyone. Instead, I would be engaged in an act of manipulation—a strategy to defeat, marginalize and subjugate others. Violence emanates from this fear. And this fear is rooted in what is often regarded as the ‘ego’. My ‘ego’, as many mystics and spiritual leaders have said, is not my true self; my true self is not separated from the eternal energy that spreads out everywhere; my true self is an indivisible whole—a rhythm of love and connectedness. But my ‘ego’ is a burden that I carry; I begin to equate myself with the uniform I wear. My salary, my class, my caste, my position begin to define me. In a way, it is ignorance. The tragedy is that everything

around us promotes this ignorance—casteism tells you that you are superior because you are born in a certain family; capitalism tells you that competition is a virtue and you can survive only by defeating others; developmentalism tells you that only by conquering nature you can assert yourself. So you see it is a celebration of ignorance, egoistic pride, fear and violence.

Student: *Sir, you have really made me think. Violence is deeply related to the ignorance that our inflated egos perpetuate. Is it possible to overcome this ignorance when the larger system keeps it alive? Is it possible to do something in the field of education? Is there something called peace education? I am curious to know.*

Teacher: Yes, if you broaden the meaning and experience of education, it does have an important role to play in cultivating peace and creating a better society. However, what

The tragedy is that everything around us promotes a kind of ignorance—casteism tells you that you are superior because you are born in a certain family; capitalism tells you that competition is a virtue and you can survive only by defeating others; developmentalism tells you that only by conquering nature you can assert yourself. So you see it is a celebration of ignorance, egoistic pride, fear and violence.

goes on in the name of what we regard as formal/institutionalized education is not really very promising. I feel sad to say that this system of education is rooted in the principle of violence. Take its three central features, and you can understand what I mean. First, see the structure of most of our educational institutions—the way power is exercised through diverse forms of surveillance, discipline and punishment. Even though there is a public opinion against brute/corporal punishment, there are subtle forms of punishment that cause violence—the violence that hurts the mind and heart. The tyranny of examinations, the stigma associated with failure, the objectification and documentation of the learner and the resultant fear psychosis make it difficult for a free/relaxed/dialogic communication between the teacher and the taught. This is the beginning of violence because violence is nothing but a broken relationship. Second, it transforms a learner into a reckless competitor; the obsession with grading, ranking, hierarchy and success that characterizes the ritualization of school/university practices is not conducive to the cultivation of a mind that cares, shares and loves. Instead, it produces restlessness, anxiety, sado-masochism and violence. Third, the way it structures, classifies and disseminates knowledge, it burdens the mind. From a school kid to a university scholar—we are all trained to become consumers of bundles of information, facts, experiments, theories. Seldom are we encouraged to become silent, contemplative, meditative and reflexive. As a result, theory remains separated from poetry, information

from awakening, skills from fundamental principles of existence. A ‘knowledgeable’ man carries a burdened mind; he/she cannot laugh, sing, dance, love. Education is devoid of the ecstasy of life. Under these circumstances, if you introduce a separate course on ‘peace education’ it is unlikely to serve any meaningful purpose. Yes, at times schools and colleges would talk about Buddha, Jesus and Gandhi, organize blood donation camps, and plant trees. But if you go beyond this symbolism, you would find that teachers are asking children to fight with one another for getting better grades. Peace education would be learned through violence. That is the irony.

Student: *Is there no way out? You are an educationist. Please tell me whether it is possible to approach education differently so that we can move towards peace.*

Teacher: Yes, as I have already said, we need to broaden the meaning and experience of education. When education is not merely accumulation of academic knowledges in different disciplines, when education is not limited to just formal sites of learning, when education is truly a lifelong project, when education is political, aesthetic, economic and spiritual, and when education is a quest for a higher/nobler purpose, only then is it possible to move towards peace.

Student: *I am not understanding. What you are saying appears to be abstract and vague. Can you concretize and elaborate?*

Teacher: Let me try. As we have discussed, the structures of our society, polity and economy are not conducive to peace. Moreover, formal education, as I have just pointed

out, is centered on violent practices. So you cannot expect that through some changes here and there, or through a course in moral education or peace education you can create peace. Only when through perpetual learning and unlearning we redefine ourselves, realize our true potential and evolve and practice a different kind of politics and economics there is a possibility of a break through. And I wish to suggest before your curious mind a set of characteristics of the kind of education I am imagining for peace. First, it attaches great importance to the spirit of connectedness; we are all manifestations of the same energy that makes it possible for the sun to radiate, the river to flow, the flower to bloom, the fishes to swim in the ocean, the child to play with boundless laughter, the old man with a wrinkled face to look at the star. This realization comes through mindfulness, meditation and silence. This causes a sense of gratitude—‘I am because everything else is there’. And this ethos of care is radically different from what is often glorified in the name of techno-science—erecting a wall between human species and nature, the urge to objectify and conquer nature. It leads to a shift—from the technical gaze of an expert to the caring hand of a pilgrim. Second, because of this connectedness it attaches great importance to the culture of sharing; one is not an insulated/atomized being; instead, one fulfills oneself in reciprocity, in merging with others. The spirit of sharing is antithesis of fear; when we become self-obsessed and possessive we become fearful, and this fear leads to violence. Hence the spirit of offering and

sharing is always peaceful. If these two guiding principles accompany us we would give a new meaning to the practice of education, politics, economics and culture. If reason or intellect remains dissociated from the deep realization of beauty, grace and love, our schools/universities would keep producing disenchanted cynics, soulless experts and arrogant intellectuals. With love and beauty science becomes meditation—an urge to make sense of the world, not a process of heartless objectification; technology becomes enabling—not something that enslaves man and nature; social sciences promote cross-cultural understanding and make us aware of the practices that degrade

With love and beauty science becomes meditation—an urge to make sense of the world, not a process of heartless objectification; technology becomes enabling—not something that enslaves man and nature; social sciences promote cross-cultural understanding and make us aware of the practices that degrade human souls so that we can create life-affirming practices; art, literature, psychology and aesthetics take us to the depths of human consciousness; politics becomes a morally grounded dialogic practice that encourages us to reflect on our collective good.

human souls so that we can create life-affirming practices; art, literature, psychology and aesthetics take us to the depths of human consciousness; politics becomes a morally grounded dialogic practice that encourages us to reflect on our collective good; and economics aims at fulfilling true human needs (not the artificial ones that only promote greed and mindless consumption) which are in harmony with the eco-system. In other words, I am suggesting a paradigm-shift.

Student: *It is brilliant. Even though it may be seen as utopian, after conversing with you I have begun to feel that it is worth striving for, if we are really interested in peace. However, one question haunts me, and I have found no clear answer to it. There is a politics of resistance against a violent social order; but then, even the resistance politics falls into the same trap; it becomes violent. Is there anything called absolute non-violence? Or is it that for a noble cause some violence is needed?*

Teacher: I am happy you have asked this question. Even I am not very clear about it. Let us try to understand it. Yes, it seems, non-violence cannot be absolutized. A simple illustration is that when a doctor does a surgery he causes pain to the human body; but then, this pain is for a noble cause, for saving the patient. Likewise, if a person attacks me brutally and loses all sanity for engaging in any conversation, I would possibly engage in counter-violence to defend myself. These forms of violence have to be understood with a great deal of empathy, and situated in the complexity of life- situation. Yes, you are right—quite

often the politics of resistance becomes violent. This is a pretty serious issue. Yes, I do admit that oppressive regimes often become extremely non-dialogic and stop all channels of communication; this possibly leads many revolutionaries to opt for violent strategies for justice. And this violence may prove to be therapeutic for the oppressed; it may give them the confidence to restore their human agency. It would be wrong to condemn these practices of revolutionary counter-violence with any absolute moral standard. Having said this, I wish to add two more points which I want you to reflect on. First, there are limits to counter-violence, even if, at times, it brings about political revolution. Because quite often the politics (even revolutionary politics) that is based on guerilla warfare or violent strategies breeds authoritarianism, conspiracy theory, and a culture of suspicion. Revolutionary regimes, history gives us ample illustrations—from the Stalinist regime to Mao's cultural revolution, often become repressive, violent and authoritarian. Moreover, it is doubtful whether at a deeper level one can combat violence through violence. To take an illustration from our contemporary living, we are caught into a vicious circle of state-centric violence and terrorist violence, Maoist upsurge and police encounters. Second, even though there is no absolute non-violence, it should not be seen as an excuse for perpetuating violence in every sphere of life. To take a simple example, even if I kill a mosquito that bites me when I go to sleep, it should not give me the justification to destroy the entire bio-diversity for a purely man-centric,

techno-scientific, development-oriented world. In other words, as I feel, non-violence, despite its limitations, is a better and higher ideal to pursue. Even if we fail time and again, we ought to pursue this goal.

Student: *I understand what you are saying. And it makes sense to me. However, I have a query: Do you see the danger—one can become extremely violent to oneself in pursuit of non-violence? I know it sounds paradoxical. You can throw light on it.*

Teacher: I appreciate your enquiring spirit. Your question is meaningful; I too feel that it is possible for one to become violently non-violent, and that is not a very nice thing to happen. Suppose I am angry with you for some reason or other. And in order to control my anger I begin to punish myself severely, carry a heavy burden of guilt, and deny my spontaneity, my natural flow. In this case my non-violence would not make me light, would not generate calmness in my being; instead, I would remain repressed, anxiety-ridden. If peace is about calmness, silence, deep realization of oneness, it cannot come through self-torture. Not solely that. When I try to become non-violent through a violent way, I begin to carry a baggage of egoistic pride—‘see they are violent; but I am a superior being; I am non-violent!’

Student: *That's fine, sir. But then, surely one needs some amount of self-discipline, some effort to retain peace in one's life. How is it possible without inflicting some pain and violence on oneself?*

Teacher: Yes, we do need meditative practices, self-observation, and some sort of work on our physical bodies

and psychic consciousness. But always realize that meditation is musical, an ecstasy; self-discipline is not self-torture; it is like a nurturing a mother's eyes that generate love. Take a simple illustration from our everyday life. Suppose when I see the world around me, see its corruption, scams, violence I evolve a negative orientation to everything, and I begin to use harsh words—the words that are toxic to articulate my frustration, my anger, my disillusionment. How do I alter myself? As with great care I begin to observe myself, I realize that my negative reaction and my bitter words are by no means helping me to overcome the negativity in the world; instead, the more I allow the world to generate negativity in me, I do a damage to myself, I lose my calmness, the possibility that is innate in me. Now this realization may inspire me to experience the beauty and power of gentle words and the calmness of being. I realize that I can exist as a radiant moon even when the air in the violent city is polluted, and who knows some people might find their poetry by seeing the moon. This is not an escape; rather it is a refreshingly a new engagement with life; love and resistance converge. In other words, it is through understanding, care and empathy I undergo a process of transformation. And in this journey if one finds a guide, a guru, a friend, one is truly lucky.

Student: *Sir, don't mind. I am not yet fully convinced. Is it really possible for the average human consciousness to arrive at such a higher stage? Violence continues, despite Buddha and Jesus, despite peace movements, despite deep spiritual discourses. We did experience the horror of World War 1; yet, World War 2 happened. We saw*

Hiroshima and Nagasaki; yet, we keep producing nuclear weapons. There is no end to war; in fact, the crowd mentality is so deeply intoxicated with war—war in the name of nationalism, war in the name of religion, war in the name of balance of power. Yes, some social scientists began to warn us of contemporary ‘risk society’; yet with the market-oriented doctrine of ‘unlimited growth’ we keep destroying nature; and the much talked about warnings like ‘climate change’ and ‘global warming’ exist as mere words. Not solely that. At one level society is brutal. Sometimes I feel that it does not like those who live for peace; it finishes them and then reduces them into museum pieces for ritualistic recalling. Do we really take Jesus, Buddha, Rumi and Gandhi seriously? I doubt.

Teacher: Your anguish, my dear, is genuine. Yes, there is no reason to believe that society (which remains largely violent in terms of its institutions and economic and cultural practices) would necessarily accompany you if you pursue a peaceful path. Love or peace is simple and hence beautiful; but a complex world is bound to be uneasy with all that is simple and honest. To love is to trust; to trust is to transcend borders and boundaries. But ‘experts’ in international politics and ‘defence strategists’ with their complex discourses would not understand it; they understand war, diplomacy and strategy, not love—the way a bird flies and crosses boundaries. To love is to share; but management graduates have lost the capacity to understand this profound simplicity; instead, they would tell you that you must buy, consume and possess all latest products and ‘distinguish’ yourself from others. These are real difficulties, my friend. Yet, I would suggest that it is preferable to look

at the sky and feel its infinity, even when everyone around you is measuring every inch of the earth, and killing each other for its possession. Death, my friend, is meaningful only when it embraces love, peace and tranquility. True education is nothing but this realization.